

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS KUWAIT 001021

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARP AND OES
STATE PASS EPA
AMMAN FOR ENVIRONMENT HUB

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [SENV](#) [EPET](#) [ALOW](#) [IZ](#) [KU](#)

SUBJECT: TFI201: OIL SMOKE CLOUDS OVER KUWAIT

REF: KUWAIT 920

1. SUMMARY: People in Kuwait awoke March 21, 2003, to a dark sky north of the city. Post confirmed through US military sources that the smoke clouds were caused from multiple oil well fires burning in Iraq and started by the Iraqis. Kuwait's Environment Public Authority (EPA) said the sky looked worse than it actually was and that the pollution first registered in Kuwait shortly after midnight did not pose any immediate health risks. With winds forecast to continue blowing north to south over the next few days, more oil smoke was anticipated, and the EPA said it would notify post should the pollution reach dangerous health levels. END SUMMARY.

2. Dr. Mohammad Al-Sarawi, Chairman of Kuwait's Environment Public Authority (EPA), told Econoff his organization began detecting low but rising levels of "sulfur oxide" in the Kuwaiti air shortly after midnight March 21, indicating hydrocarbons from burning oil. The EPA takes air samples every five minutes from six fixed stations located throughout the country, as part of its Emergency Response program (reftel).

3. At dawn, the sky north of the city appeared a dark purple-gray color. US military sources in Kuwait confirmed later in the morning that the pollution was caused by multiple oil fires burning in Iraq, which were started the previous night by the Iraqis. Fires were burning in the southern portion of Iraq's large Al-Rumaylah oil field, a small portion of which straddles the border into Kuwait, where it is called Radqa oil field.

4. Dr. Sarawi said the pollution had not reached dangerous health levels. He explained that the dark sky was caused by smoke trapped in the "inversion layer," held between colder and warmer air on either side, much like smog in an urban environment. In Kuwait's northern city of Jahra, the sulfur oxide level reached only 10 parts per billion, he said, and would have to reach more than ten times this amount to pose inhalation risks. He added that by early afternoon the sky had cleared and the level of pollution had decreased throughout Kuwait.

5. Dr. Sarawi said that he received several telephone calls from Kuwaiti and international media outlets with questions about the oil fires, but that his emergency operations center had not received any calls from concerned people living in Kuwait. Likewise, Post's operations center did not receive any calls from American citizens asking about the pollution.

6. COMMENT: Given that many Kuwaitis and some Americans living in Kuwait were here during the Gulf War and remember how retreating Iraqi troops set hundreds of oil wells on fire, turning the skies over Kuwait City black for months, this most recent episode pales by comparison. Nonetheless, Dr. Sarawi agreed to immediately inform Post should pollution from oil fires or other sources reach dangerous health levels, so that we can notify our staff and the larger Amcit community.

JONES